



T E X A S ☆ T I M E S

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More Than Just a Game

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Texas fascinates, and even mystifies, the outside world. The latest indication of this is “Friday Night Lights,” a new NBC television drama about high school football.

The series is set in “Dillon, Texas,” which doesn’t exist. But the Dillon mascot is a panther, the same mascot as Odessa Permian high school. It’s obviously based on the original “Friday Night Lights,” a controversial book about Odessa Permian’s 1988 football season.

It’s easy to see why Hollywood has again visited Texas. Those not fortunate enough to live here know that Texans, by and large, have a pride in our state that’s unmatched anywhere else. Outsiders find that difficult to understand.

The first episode was entertaining. Dillon won its opening game on a last-minute “hail Mary” pass, but the star quarterback is seriously injured. The writers tried to capture some uplifting aspects of Texas football to players, their fans and the community. Some fictional and negative aspects of our Friday night custom showed up as well. After all, this is entertainment.

According to “Dave Campbell’s Football,” some 1,150 high schools across Texas field 11-man teams, and another 100 play the six-man version. The weekly ritual is a way of life here, as much a part of our cultural heritage as oil and cattle. It is the center of social activity in towns and cities during the early days of the school year – a weekly event that is far bigger than the game itself.

Many people invest significant emotional resources in their local team. Major lessons are learned in the process, and not simply about the techniques of blocking and tackling. In smaller towns, particularly, football is a unifying element that binds communities together.

High school football can teach players, parents, siblings, classmates and community fans lessons about sportsmanship, integrity, leadership, character, and patience. The process can educate us on how to be gracious winners and proud losers. Done properly, as it usually is, high school football can be a great vehicle for learning life’s lessons.

The new TV show had its origins in 1988, when a Philadelphia writer arrived in Odessa announcing his intention to spend a year writing a book about Permian football. He indicated the book would be the football equivalent of “Hoosiers,” the heartwarming story about a small Indiana high school that won the state basketball championship in 1966 against bigger rivals and long odds.

That’s not the way it turned out. Although the tale of Odessa Permian’s 1988 season contained positive scenes, it also implied that a relentless

drive to win, class differences, and racial issues tainted football in Odessa. In 2004, a movie version of “Friday Night Lights” was produced. Like the book, it was a critical and financial success.

But feelings in Odessa were mixed at best. Some critics pointed to clear exaggerations in the storytelling. Others correctly noted that football is usually a unifying event, but the book portrayed it as a divisive force.

In fact, most schools and coaches do their best to avoid overemphasis on winning. A great example could be seen last month in College Station, when the Westlake Chaparrals from suburban Austin were playing A&M Consolidated.

In the second quarter, as Matt Nader, a star offensive tackle for Westlake, sat on the bench, his heart went into ventricular fibrillation. He was treated, revived, and taken to the hospital. During the crisis, players from Westlake and A&M Consolidated stood on the field and spontaneously began a silent prayer.

Chaps Coach Derek Long told his team: “There’s a lot that’s more important than a football game. And family is more important.” Both teams agreed to halt play right there. The game was declared a tie.

A&M Consolidated families later delivered water and food to the Westlake families holding vigil at College Station Medical Center hospital in College Station. Matt has since had surgery and recovered. Although his football career is over, he is now prepared for a full and productive life. His fellow players, and all of us, have been reminded of our most important priorities.

Football is played well all over America. But nowhere else is the weekly ritual such an important part of our tradition, our sense of community, our shared experiences, as it is in Texas. We all know the value of this custom, so much a part of life in our state.

It may be only happenstance, but NBC was wise to schedule “Friday Night Lights” for Tuesday evening. If they aired it on Friday night, nobody in Texas would be home to watch it.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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